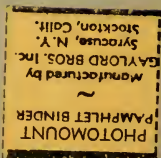


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THE RED BEECH

By A. LAYMAN

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*LETTERS FROM THE RED  
BEECH*

SIX LETTERS BY A LAYMAN TO A MINISTER  
OF THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

ON

THE CANON, THE PULPIT, AND CRITICISM.



EDINBURGH: JOHN MACLAREN & SON.

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# *Letters from the Red Beech*

ON THE CANON, THE PULPIT, AND CRITICISM.

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## I.

*3d September 1880.*

MY DEAR SIR,—I believe that this is the first time on which I have broken silence on this question. Like not a few other laymen I have a filial desire for the welfare of the Free Church, and for the welfare of Scotland through it, but I have thought that both might be best promoted by zealously holding one's tongue on the Robertson Smith matter, and taking no side upon it. Like a good many such men, however, I have at last been driven out of mere silence. Some general and important aspects of the question are coming to the front, which seem to me to demand not so much special knowledge—that I do not possess—as a frank interchange of conscientious views between laymen and ministers. And while I have the honour to know most of the leading ministers of the Free Church, I am desirous to address one who is not only a member of the Commission of Assembly which has to deal with this special matter, but, above all things, a minister and a preacher—a man deservedly trusted and deservedly beloved, as a devout and competent dispenser of the divine Word to at least two generations of his countrymen.

For reasons which will appear in the sequel, I think the influence of the Scottish pulpit,

and the use which its occupants may make of the knowledge which they already possess, of the highest importance in this matter. But in the meantime I ask leave to mention to you those new and more constraining aspects of the question which have led to my addressing you.

At the last meeting of the Free Church Commission of Assembly some of the weightier movers in this question abstained in a very remarkable way from the stress formerly laid on the Westminster Confession of Faith, and instead directed the mind of their hearers to a certain traditional belief of the Church on those subjects. Some of them pointed a contrast, apparently for the same purpose, between the Bible as being our supreme standard, while the Confession is only subordinate. And all this was reflected in the terms of Dr Wilson's motion, which, as carried, appointed a committee to consider the bearing of Professor Smith's writings on "the accepted belief and teaching of the Church." This phraseology appeared to one of the most trusted and experienced friends of the Free Church, Mr Brown Douglas, so unusual and so dangerous, that on 17th August last he wrote a letter of caution and warning as to a course which might perhaps have been entered upon unawares. But it immediately

appeared that it was not unawares that a change had been suggested. A man so representative and almost official as Mr Norman Walker at once writes in answer, that pressing the letter of our Confession on this point is fraught with danger; that there are articles in the Church's creed which were never formulated, because they did not need to be, but which it is unlawful to controvert; that there are fifty points *within* the Confession of minor importance, which Mr Walker would grudge excessively that any man should be held a heretic for denying, while the views supposed to be held by Professor Smith, which Mr Walker assumes in his letter to be beside the Confession rather than opposed to it, are not only not to be tolerated by the Church, but are so bad that, if the Church did tolerate them, Mr Walker would not think it prudent to remain in its communion.

The new question is therefore fairly raised, and I for one do not regret it, or view it with the same alarm that Mr Brown Douglas does. He is, no doubt, thinking of the judicial duty of the Commission, or rather of the Assembly, and of the danger of dealing unfairly with Professor Smith individually. And certainly that will require careful consideration. But the main question for the Church is one which does not concern Professor Smith alone, and which the decision of his case one way or other will do very little to settle. It is equally mixed up with the questions which came to the front in Dr Marcus Dods' case, and in the discussion on Professor Candlish's lecture, and it is raised, as you know, by the opinions of some of the elder, as well as most of the younger, men of the Free Church, to say nothing of other communions. The generalising of the question does not make it less anxious or important—rather more so. But it has two advantages. It redeems it, in the first place, from the somewhat disingenuous aspect which for the last few years it has assumed—which it has assumed equally on both sides, though,

perhaps, without much moral fault on either. On the one hand, I have never been able to keep quite grave while Professor Smith and his friends have filled the air with their professions of attachment to the Westminster Confession, and their demand that orthodoxy be determined in the Free Church by it, and by it alone. Nor have I been surprised in the least when this demand was suddenly withdrawn, as at the last General Assembly, as soon as it seemed advantageous for their side to put an end to the cause without a dogmatic decision. On the other hand, the acknowledgment that the Confession of 1647 may be imperfect on the head of Scripture, because what ought now to be part of the Church's faith did not previously need to be formulated, has been recently more and more imminent. All through the present case it was becoming clearer that the framers of the Confession never had before them the kind of questions which has now arisen, and that consequently if the words they have used are such as to decide our modern controversy, either in the one sense or the other, that decision can only be a sort of *fluke*—an undesirable result for a court of law; and for an ecclesiastical Assembly, which is more or less a court of conscience, one deeply discreditable. The strongest and most respectable feelings which have been shocked by the views narrated or suggested by our Aberdeen Professor are feelings of the present Christian conscience about the Word of God itself, and these can never be expressed in the anachronisms of a Confession two centuries old without a painful sense of mental circuitousness and moral twist. For these reasons I believe I am expressing the views of a good many Free Church laymen when I say that the demand by the most orthodox section of the Free Church that it, as "a living witness for the truth," shall no longer in this matter walk in what Mr Walker calls the "fetters" of creed, is a righteous demand, and one which comes

home to the conscience. It is so altogether apart from the motives which may have originated the claim and the views which may now support it.

For you, the trusted pastors of the Scottish Church, know that the best of your educated laymen generally take this position. They are not intensely anxious about the question whether a Professor of Hebrew in the nineteenth century had present to his mind all the lines drawn by men in the seventeenth, still less whether men who formed creeds in the seventeenth had present to them questions which in God's providence were to come into existence long after they were dead and buried. These things do not touch the general conscience; they have no warrant from the Judge and no commission from the King. At best, they touch only that second-hand and artificial conscience, which men, born into large societies, form for themselves, under the pressure of circumstances which they did not create and do not defend. But the moment you raise the question, What is the supreme and not the subordinate standard—what is the relation of the Christian to the Bible and the Word of God—you raise one from which there is no escape in conscience. That is a matter which we are bound to meet, and on which you will find most intelligent men in

your congregations anxious to get information, and willing to respond to all appeals.

But it is one on which there has been far too little communication hitherto between pastors and people. I do not allude to the more difficult and elaborate questions which have been introduced to your notice, as well as ours, chiefly by Professor Smith in the "Encyclopædia." I allude to the more common and ordinary knowledge on matters of the canon, which all ministers attain in the course of their education, but which is only in exceptional cases made equally familiar to their congregations. Is it not possible that much of the uncertainty and anxiety to which we are exposed, and some even of the difficulty which we feel in dealing with new questions like this Aberdeen one, may be owing to our not having rightly used the knowledge which we already possess—*i. e.*, which our trusted and educated guides possess, and which they use for themselves?

I reserve the unfolding of this suggestion, in one or two illustrations, for future paragraphs. But I desire to express in the meantime the deep and affectionate respect with which I approach on this subject one who knows and loves Scripture—one, indeed, I had almost said, whom Scripture knows and loves.

## II.

MY DEAR SIR,—You know, as all ministers know, that the canon of Scripture is not received by us upon the authority of the Church, but by the judgment of the individual from age to age upon the evidence presented to him. This is a matter in which Protestants hold that they deal directly with God and His providence, and not with any Church assuming to stand in His room. And one result of this is familiar to you, or at least was familiar in your college days, but it is not equally familiar to all your hearers. Ques-

tions of the canon are not ended once for a among us, as they are among Roman Catholics. Among them the thing is settled by authority for the authority of the Church is above Scripture. The Catholic Church settled, once on a time (in the case of some writings on very strong, in the case of others on very slight, evidence), what ancient writings were to be held as genuinely apostolical; but, that once settled, its judgment is held infallible and cannot be gone over again. To us this assumption of the

Church is hateful. Scripture is, for us, above the Church. We have first to find for ourselves, as individuals, what is Scripture, and what are the characteristics of its several parts, and then that enables us to make and work a Church. The Church has no authority in any matters of faith—least of all, in the fundamental question—What is that revelation of God which regulates faith and regulates the Church?

I have suggested that this duty of constant "criticism" of the canon, or, if you prefer the Latin to the Greek word, of constant "private judgment" upon it, is not such a truism among our Protestant people as it is in the schools. Am I not right with regard to our Scotch congregations? Take one illustration of it. I believe the majority of the people in your congregation have a fancy that they are called upon to believe in all the books of our present canon with the same firmness of faith. You know otherwise, and so does every young minister who is not disgracefully ignorant of the elements of his profession. You know well that the evidence for all the books varies greatly; and that while with regard to some of them there never was any doubt in the Church, others were by some parts of it rejected, by others received, and by the majority finally accepted on external evidence of a very slight and slender kind. And that evidence is now for Protestants exactly what it was then, with such variations as critics have since discovered. It is still the same evidence, external and internal—that evidence and no other—which God proposes separately to the faith of the individual with regard to each of the books—books which He chose to give separately, and with a separate history, for two or three generations at least. The Catholic has found a better way. For him the decision of the Church equalises his faith in the books which the Church equally receives. The Protestant would often desire a similar adjustment. But he knows he cannot do it without dishonesty. His faith follows God's warrant; he must take the facts as he finds them. And the facts are notorious—notorious, that is, to you who are ministers, and to all of us laymen who read.

Walking in Queen Street the other day with a

doctor of divinity distinguished for his caution, I said to him incidentally—"I suppose I am right in holding that the evidence for the Epistle to the Romans being apostolical is sixteen times as great as the evidence for the 2d Epistle of Peter being so?" "Sixteen times!" he answered, "You might say sixty-six times." I have no doubt he was right, though I suppose that he referred exclusively to the external evidence—to the historical proof that traces such a book to an inspired man, not the mere impression made upon the mind as to the excellence of its doctrine, apart from its origin. I suppose his "sixty-six times" does not at all exaggerate the notorious fact. But to be very safe, let us say that it does. Let us say instead only ten times. I suppose that no man can look into these things, I do not say with ability, but with honesty, without arriving at the result that he must have ten times the faith in the apostolicity of the one epistle that he has in the apostolicity of the other. Had it been left to us we might have desired it otherwise. We might have desired that all writings of men of the apostolic time should have descended to us with the same evidence that they came from men inspired. But God has willed it otherwise. He has given us some of them with no sufficient evidence of this, and these we therefore hold apocryphal, though they were accepted by some of the ancient Churches. He has given us others, for which the balance of external evidence is very slight, but yet, as most good judges hold, sufficient; and which, therefore, after delay, and with some difference of opinion, have been received into the ordinary canon. And He has given us yet others, like the majority of the gospels and epistles, for whose authorship by inspired men the proof is conclusive and overwhelming. He has chosen to give us Scripture, not as one book, but in sundry times and in divers manners, and with claims on our belief in which each part differs from each other, sometimes very greatly, according to circumstances carefully ordered by His providence. That is the Bible as He has left it to us, and if we desire to have it as He has left it, we must take it so. If we prefer to go to the Church for our Bible, or for our faith, that also is

open to us; but only by refusing the facts and Him who has appointed them.

But it is time to hear what you have to say. And I fancy it may be not unlike the answer of a clerical friend to me the other day, when I touched on some of these things as familiar to him. He said, not without irritation, "O yes; we know all that. But what is the use of it?"

The use of it is this. You know all that, and know it familiarly. *But have you made your people familiar with it?*

I think the question is pertinent to the present time and some of its difficulties. I am sure, at least, it is not impertinent, for it is addressed to one whom I have selected not as deficient in his pastoral duties, but as eminent in their performance. You, as a Protestant, hold it to be the duty of the private Christian to judge of these matters for himself. But there are only three or four private Christians in your congregation who are qualified for doing so by their own reading—who have had inclination and leisure to get up the same kind of information for themselves which you attained as a divinity student. The others, so far as I can see, must trust to the one man who has been equipped (for their sakes) with this special knowledge to communicate it to them—not, of course, to communicate it to them in constant detail, but to keep them familiar with the broader and more notorious outlines such as I have referred to.

"Yes, but," you still insist, or if you do not, others do, "what use would it be to them? I could make use of this or any other knowledge I have in various mischievous ways, and in this among the number. But you have not yet answered my question, What use my doing so would be, not to me, but to my hearers?"

I might, I think, limit myself to answering that there is always some use in people performing their fundamental duties. You tell us it is the duty of the private Christian to receive Scripture as God has given it to him, and not according to any Church canon. If God has laid this duty of private judgment upon laymen, there is a strong probability that, sooner or later, some advantage will result from their performing and some danger from their neglecting it. And if it

is a duty which in its own nature can only be performed by the unlearned layman making use of the historical knowledge with which others are entrusted for his use, then there is the same probability that injury will result to the individuals concerned, and perhaps to the whole organisation, from the parts of it not performing their several functions. You tell us that laymen in this matter are a jury, bound each to give their individual verdict. But how can they give a verdict unless the facts are laid before them? And if it is their duty to give a verdict on the facts, is it not a strong thing to ask what use their knowing the facts will be?

But, apart from general presumptions, there are surely some obvious advantages in the present day in the people being furnished with the same information about Scripture which their ministers possess. And that is all I plead for. If I have in any way ill-stated the facts as you know them—and this of the varying evidence for the separate books which have been gathered by the Church from the separate churches is only one illustration—then take the facts in the better form in which you and all ministers of our Presbyterian Church possess them. Try it in the case of your own congregation. Are you sure that there are no good Christian people in it on whom the sudden statement of such facts would have a disquieting effect? But if they had been familiar with them, as you have been for twenty years, there would have been no such danger. Their faith would be exposed to no shock, being conversant with the facts which God had prepared for it. Again, are there no people in your congregation on whom the new positions with regard to books of the Old Testament, which are being made known to us through Professor Smith, have a disquieting, and, indeed, a dangerous effect? You are fortunate if you have none such. But how much of that danger to them is caused by their dim feeling—a feeling which they share with you—that it is their duty to act as critics upon all facts and arguments that come up to them in this region, combined with the certain knowledge that hitherto they have been never invited to do so, and that many

would count it a dangerous innovation? Had they been in the habit of weighing books, and parts of books, according to their separate evidence and history (which, as you know, vary much even as presented now from time to time, in so much that you do not believe in the genuineness of texts and narratives which are retained in our ordinary translation, and in which your predecessors did believe) had these hearers been taken along with you in all this, they would not have been more disposed to believe in new and rash theories, but they would have been more prepared to judge of them fairly along with you, and to suffer no danger in the process. And lastly, you do not believe less in the unity of Scripture—the oneness of its spirit and message, the “consent of all the parts and the scope of the

whole”—because the parts have very unequal claims upon our faith, and some of them have suffered far more than others in their transmission to us. On the contrary, you recognise all the more a unity of revelation because of the multiplicity of Scripture and those sundry ways and divers manners of which criticism takes cognisance. And would it not be well if this were also the experience of all, and especially of some of the older and some of the younger members of our congregations, who at present are apt to feel as if allegations (not even as to canonicity, but as to the authorship and dates) of particular parts—parts which you know to be often of less importance—tore up the very texture of their faith?

### III.

MY DEAR SIR,—In my last letter I gave, as an illustration of the Protestant duty of criticism or private judgment, the obligation to *weigh* the varying evidence for the several books of the canon—evidence which, as all reading men know, varies excessively in strength. It may be said—and will naturally be said by those who object to the expediency of raising so fundamental a question—that that is not the point at present before the Free Church, which is surely troubled enough without, &c. I answer—That is precisely why I raise it. I am not—or, at least, I do not intend here to make myself—one of the judges of Professor Smith. You are, and you will not find me disposed to intrude upon your province. I go behind that question, and I have already indicated my two special reasons for doing so. They are not the general grounds on which some of the best laymen in the Free Church—including, if I mistake not, such men as those who sign themselves “Unsettled” and “Mizraim” respectively—raise more general questions than those before the Church courts. My first reason is that leading men in those Church courts have indicated the intention to

abandon the question whether Professor Smith’s views are in conformity with the standards of their Church; and to raise instead the question whether they are in conformity with the standard of the universal Church—the Bible; not as it is defined in any Confession (now admitted on both sides to be defective), but as it has been given by God to man. And whether they intended it so or not, I believe most educated laymen are of opinion that they are thus raising the real question—the only question worth discussing by men who expect after a few years to have the grass growing green over them, and who may therefore as well occupy those years with fact and not with fiction. And this first reason leads on to my second. For the origin of the Bible and man’s introduction to its parts as God gave them has long been part of the ordinary furniture and training of the Christian ministry; and that not so much as material for amusing or even edifying the Christian congregation, as for discharging from age to age the fundamental Protestant duty of receiving truth direct from the divine spring and not from artificial pools. And this forced me back upon a conviction which

has been growing for some years. It is that the educated ministry has it already in its power to put us in the best position for coming to a right solution of these questions. Whether the right solution shall be one on Professor Smith's side or not, I, as you know, have not been able to make up my mind. But I believe we, the mass of the Christian people, shall be most likely, under God's providence, to come at the right solution of these new and uncertain questions by being put on a level with you as to the certain results of the old. I believe you can do your best for us by simply communicating to us (*i.e.*, "making common" to us with you) what you already thoroughly know, but what you do not permit your congregations to know equally well.

I may, before laying down my pen, illustrate this under another head. But meantime let me make reference to a matter which has come up in connection with Professor Binnie's admirable pamphlet on the proposed reconstruction of the Old Testament history. I call it an admirable pamphlet from my own point of view—that of an educated layman with no time to get up special knowledge on the subject. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it deals with a subject new to the popular mind in Scotland in a lucid and almost luminous way; it distinguishes between things great and small, desiring to give conscience its due on one side, and candour its due on the other; and it treats in this fashion a great and grave question which has not yet actually confronted us, but which certainly lies behind the literary question raised by Professor Smith, and is accordingly waiting for us round the corner of the street. Whether Professor Binnie has dealt with it conclusively I do not at all know; but I respect the intellectual as well as the moral qualities of his work, and not least one intellectual quality which has almost a moral value—I mean the sense of humour which suffuses his writing, a most human element, "rich in saving common-sense," and for which many an eager controversialist might barter half his ability. I may add that in the correspondence between Professor Smith and him, Professor Binnie seems to me generally to have the best of it. Professor Smith says, "You have attacked a

scheme which I believe to be false, but which my recent publications and the proceedings upon them—which together form the occasion, though not the cause of your writing—will inevitably make people associate with my name." Professor Binnie's answer is, "It is true, and I wish you had considered it before issuing your recent publications, and had taken a little more pains to dissociate yourself from a scheme with which people so inevitably connect you." But on one point—one, too, on which Professor Smith has made no reply\*—his brother theologian does not seem to me to be so successful, and it bears directly on the subject of my letter to you. In one of his publications—I think his letter to the Presbytery—Professor Smith had used the words, "we of the critical school," and Professor Binnie tells him that his expressly identifying himself with the critical school may give rise to grave misunderstandings. Now, considering that Professor Binnie in his pamphlet generally, though not universally, means by the "critical school" the school that denies the supernatural, I think it must have occurred to him that this could not have been the sense in which Professor Smith took his Presbytery into confidence on the matter, and that grave misunderstandings founded on that supposition were not seriously to be apprehended. But it is this use of the phrase all through Dr Binnie's pamphlet which staggered me while I read that excellent publication, and which makes me put to him the question, "Do you not belong to the critical school in the Free Church? Do you not at least belong to some critical school?" The whole value of Dr Binnie's pamphlet to me is that it claims to be, and *ex facie* to a certain extent is, a critical performance; certainly its whole value as against the German critics, whom it attacks (and this is seven-eighths of the whole of it), is, that it broadly affirms and suggestively indicates that they, with all their assumptions, are most *uncritical* in their methods of procedure. I need not say that were this not its meaning, it would not be worth the paper on which it is

\* Professor Smith took it up a week or two after the date of this letter: more, however, in the interest of his own case than of the general question of language suggested in the text.

written. But if so, I must really, on behalf of the ordinary reading laity, protest against the attempt, on the part of a man of Dr Binnie's respectable position, to confine the word "critical" to the unbelieving school. It is fitted to have precisely the result which he deprecates, because if people are to choose between critical and uncritical theologians in the present day, then, according to the popular use of language in the year 1880, there is no doubt to which side they ought to turn. But this is more than a question of words, and in saying so I come back from Professor Binnie to you. Criticism is, as you and all Protestants teach us, no mere luxury of the present day. It is the fundamental necessity of honest Protestantism; and it does not belong primarily to the professoriate or the clergy, but to the Christian laity, though the professoriate and the clergy exist partly in order that the Christian laity may by

their help discharge age after age this fundamental duty. Criticism, as we have been reminded on high Free Church authority, is not a thing confined to sacred matters. It is "the science of the means by which a book has its character and place in history determined." We of the laity know that it is our highest duty to determine this for ourselves in regard to the Bible, and to act and believe accordingly in time and beyond. We look to our professors and clergy to help us in our duty; and I see no ultimate or insuperable difficulty, provided they do so. But if we are to have a theological school at all, it must be a critical school. Dr Binnie, I need not say, thoroughly understands this, and so do you. But I have a strong impression that your convictions need at the present moment to be proclaimed rather than smothered, if you are not to lose hold of the consciences of a good many men in Scotland.

#### IV.

MY DEAR SIR,—One reason for my appealing to you, and through you to the ministers of the Church rather than to some of the laity, is as follows:—I doubt whether Scotland will ever get well out of these Scripture difficulties into which she has been drifting, so long as the discussion turns merely on the amount of liberty which we may claim. I see a great many men, laymen and clergymen, who are wholly taken up with this question of liberty. Sometimes it is the extent of liberty which the Confession allows, or some particular chapter of it; sometimes it is the liberty of the Christian man, outside the Confession and anterior to its authority—both, and especially the latter, very legitimate questions. But, though "freedom is a noble thing," and has been a name to charm with in Scotland, as elsewhere, I have some doubts whether it has ever wrought any great deliverance in the distinctly religious sphere. My recollections of history rather point to the necessity in this region of something positive—some conviction of conscience, some dictate of duty, some command of God—in

order to found any healthful step of advance for ourselves or our children.

I remember thinking of this, first with regard to the delicate question which was raised some time ago, as to the accuracy of all parts of Scripture in matters of historical or narrative detail. Much was said on both sides, not too wisely, perhaps, as to the necessity of this, or, at the least, as to the presumption that the question must be answered in the affirmative. But all the time it seemed to be forgotten by many that it had not been left an open question at all—that the most important determination of it had been given in the most important instance, and that this determination is constantly pressed upon the minds of our teachers. I remember that during the latter part of that controversy you and your well-worn little Testament were never absent from my mind. That New Testament looks as if it had been constructed by God for express purpose of putting an end to this controversy by His own authority. For the most important part of it consists of four narratives, two of them held to



be by apostles, and, therefore, presumably inspired as much as their ordinary preaching was, and two of them by disciples of theirs, who may well have been inspired also. They were all given at different times, and to different Churches, and not gathered together into one for, at least, a generation or two after the first was in the possession of its original recipients. Four narratives of one life; could anything be more exactly suited to determine the question whether any of them *professed* more than the ordinary accuracy of historical narrative? And they have conclusively determined it. You are one of the men who know their Greek Testament affectionately and familiarly, and you never preach from the narrative in one of the gospels without consulting the other three. Why? For this reason among others, because you know that following one of them will, *in almost every case*, give an inaccurate account of the fact—of the acts that took place, and of the words that were said. It will not be a substantially false account. But, in most cases it will be an inaccurate one, the four accounts varying as four accounts by those who were eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word ought to vary. And so, no doubt, they did vary before the accounts first preached were committed to writing. How true this is any unlearned reader ascertains for himself by consulting one of the Harmonies where the gospels are printed in parallel columns; but it meets you in the ordinary course of your daily and public work. We might have desired and expected otherwise—that an apostolic writer, in recording the most important acts and sayings of our Lord, should have given them with perfect accuracy as they occurred. It would have been absolutely easy for divine power to have ensured this, had divine wisdom intended it. When, therefore, we see it otherwise, page after page, dialogue after dialogue, incident after incident—when we see it otherwise in the most memorable transactions, up to the very words of institution of a sacrament, which certainly happened only once, and not on four different occasions—we know what to think. We know that to say that inaccuracy is *consistent* with an apostolic gospel greatly understates the fact. The fact is, that God has provided that each gospel

should be constructed on the *plan* of inaccuracy in details—should be systematically inaccurate in historical detail, while true in the substance of the narrative. That is not the fact merely. It is the authoritative fact—the fact which has been prepared and placed so obtrusively by God's providence, that no honest man can miss seeing it when his attention is called to it, and that no teacher of His Word can avoid seeing it perpetually.

Now, this fact as to the four most important books of the canon (which, I need not say, other books of the canon carry out), is familiar to you. But I must ask as before, *Have you made it equally familiar to your people?*

This second illustration of the importance of using our old knowledge before going to meet new questions is almost my last. But you see why it seemed desirable to add it to the first, which dealt with the faith due to the varying evidence for the various books. That first duty of various faith is, according to Protestant principles, a very fundamental one, and it is one which lies on the individual. But it is one which the individual cannot well discharge without the help of his minister. Yet I find the duty of helping the laity in this particular duty—at least of doing it from the pulpit—is one which some of the best of our ministers are disposed to repudiate. Their reasons as stated to me have not been particularly clear; but I am satisfied of one thing, they do not spring from any reluctance to undertake labour for the sake of the Christian people, but much rather from a dread of disturbing their minds by presenting such ideas to their congregations. Well, I think some ministers are beginning to find that keeping their congregations ignorant of facts admittedly true is not the way to prevent disturbance—is not the way to do so, even when the facts are facts *about* the Bible and not facts *in* it. Many of our laymen are now determined to know about their Bible, and they would get through their crisis a good deal more easily if they had known for the last fifteen years the facts which their minister has known all along. But I think the second illustration suggests that this policy of keeping the people in the dark for their own

good is a dangerous one, even for the pulpit and its necessary work. It is a policy which you will find it almost impossible to confine to things which are outside the Bible, or outside its contents, and therefore outside your ordinary exposition. Some of my friends have satisfied themselves that it is not within their duty, as ministers of the Word, to warn their unlearned hearers that God has left it doubtful whether some particular book, now in the canon, is really apostolic. That is not, they say, their pulpit work. I differ from them on that point. But whether they are right on that point or not, it is not their real reason. Their real reason is that it would disturb the minds of their hearers who at present acquiesce in an easy, but false idea on the subject. But whether it is the business of a Christian teacher to instruct his people about the canon of Scripture or not, it is certainly his business to expound the four Gospels. And in expounding the Gospels he must either disturb the minds of the same class of people to the same extent, or he must use some ingenuity to prevent the construction of each Gospel, in the matter of accuracy, from having its natural effect on their minds.

It may be said, again, that the subject stated in this letter has nothing to do with Professor Robertson Smith's question; it does not relate to the Old Testament at all. And I answer again, that is partly why I start it. Fingering the blossom is not always the way to have good fruit; digging about the root, and dunging it, may come nearer the result, though it looks roundabout. It is no waste of time on the part of a ship before a voyage to adjust her compasses, and if you agree with me (as to which I am doubtful) about the duty of ministers on these points, I do not think you would differ as to the important effect which their performance of that duty for the last twenty years would have on Scotland in this year 1880.

But there are many cases which clearly fall within your duty of pointing out the facts to the people, with regard to which it is hard to say whether they are about Scripture or in Scripture. Take one of these, which I select because, besides having a most important bearing on this question of accuracy, it has the reference to the Old Testa-

ment which you desiderate in the other. I allude to the quotations from the Old Testament which are found in the New. You know well that these, taking them in the mass, are made with what may almost be described as ostentatious inaccuracy. It is not that there is an inexact quotation here and there, or even frequently; it is that they are so continual as to make it certain that Divine Providence has some lesson to teach us thereby, which we must deliberately shut our eyes against in order to miss it. Very frequently the quotation, and that by our Lord and His apostles, follows not the original Hebrew at all, but the Septuagint translation, with its divergencies from the original. Very frequently the quotation diverges from both. I am not alluding to the cases where the speaker makes a different use of the passage from what it had in the Old Testament; and sometimes a very different use from what we should have expected. That is a separate matter, and has its own importance. I allude to cases of distinct quotation, where the quotation, by a writer who is undoubtedly to some effects inspired, is again and again and again inaccurate. Now, let who will believe that this, lying everywhere on the surface of Scripture, has no intended meaning for the Christian people; I do not. It has a meaning, which, if the facts which it is their birthright to know had been laid before them in ordinary course, they would have had no difficulty in receiving directly from their Divine Teacher. For here, too, I must express the conviction that we shall not get well out of this difficulty till lay Scotland realises, as it did of old, a distinct call to make itself acquainted with the mind of God, as distinguished from the mind of the Church on this matter.

You have already observed that I differ emphatically from those who, in relation to Professor Smith's matter, pooch-pooch such questions as mere matters of scholarship with which the people have no concern. The people have the only interest in this matter which is of any consequence. The interest in them of scholars, and even that of theologians, legitimate as both of these are, are not to be compared with that of the ordinary Christian people. *They* are the jury by whose verdict everything must be decided, because to them it

has been referred by the judge. The jury, no doubt, may have matters of scholarship brought before it, and on these it ought to be asked to listen only to witnesses, who can speak to the facts—*i.e.*, to scholars. We may even be the better not only of scholarly witnesses, but of skilled witnesses, *i.e.*, of men who have been trained to marshal and weigh the facts of scholarship which are put before us. All these are helps which those who believe in the ministry as a Church ordinance hold that laymen are entitled to have; indeed, were it not for such work as this, it would be difficult to justify the modern institution of the ministry as a separate profession. Consequently, while I agree strongly with those who claim a right as laymen to look into such matters, I cannot but express regret that they have in many cases been so little systematically laid before the laity by the ministry. It would have been

the safest and best way of doing it. And it will be so now. The laymen are the jury, and must decide on their own responsibility to Him who has sworn them. But I for one should have been exceeding glad to have your summing up. Yet even this is not absolutely necessary. What is necessary—the minimum of duty for the future—humbly seems to me to be that in the ordinary course of your work you make your people acquainted with the facts, whether the facts accessible to them directly (like the mere variations in quotation), or the facts accessible to them only through you (like the variations caused by following the Septuagint). Facts and data you must give; but it is not, I concede, absolutely necessary for you to draw conclusions for your hearers. It is their duty and responsibility to do that for themselves, and when you have furnished them with the facts, with all the facts, you have delivered your soul.

## V.

MY DEAR SIR,—I probably owe it to you to state that you have not approved, much less suggested, this public method of addressing you. I take it on my own responsibility, and you are entitled to choose your time and way of sending an answer to my remarks, if you should think it right to do so. Meantime it has this advantage, that I am enabled to verify my previous knowledge, which was not quite meagre to begin with, of the views and feelings of members of the Free Church, by the varying impression which the remarks already thrown out have made upon various readers, and especially upon clerical readers. Had the result been mere hostility I should have been disappointed; but had it been mere acquiescence I should have been still more so, for in that event their publication would certainly have been uncalled for.

Observe the point—the only point—I have to make. It is not any fact as to a particular book of the canon, or as to quotations from the Septuagint, or as to the intentional inaccuracy of the Gospels, nor is it any one fact in Biblical in-

troduction, or any doubt as to any such supposed fact. I have given illustrations of these things as being notorious and familiar to you, and to all ordinarily educated ministers, though not to the people; and if I have in any way misstated them, as is abundantly likely, I have requested you at once to make the necessary correction. But in each case the correction will leave the fact as corrected a broad and obvious one, notorious to all scholars. And the only point I have to raise is, What *use* should be made of such facts when you have admitted and, if need be, adjusted them? Now, I must do my critics in speech and writing the justice to say that up to this time (24th September) none of them has endeavoured to misrepresent this point, by diverting the question to any of the illustrations. On the contrary, assuming that there are some—if not perhaps a good many—cases where theologians have knowledge of this sort which is denied to all, they have generally met me fairly on the question whether the Scotch ministry should familiarise the people, perhaps through the

pulpit, with the knowledge which it possesses. And the least return I can make is a respectful notice of some of the arguments which have been stated, partly in public, but at least as influentially in private.

"A Free Church Minister" writes to assure this doubting layman that the ministers are *anxious* that the people "should know as much as they themselves know about the formation of the Scripture canon," and that the only question is how this can be best secured. The professors, he then suggests, are practised in the statement of this subject, implying that the ministers are in the meantime not accustomed to discuss it. But that is precisely the fact of which I complain. Then he suggests that certain little books upon it, especially Mr Westcott's, "might be put into the hands of the people"—an admirable suggestion were the Christian ministry abolished, but one which does not solve the question what the ministry should do in the meantime. Even with regard to the pulpit, he gives me a further assurance. "The ministers are neither afraid nor unwilling to state what they know about the canon in the pulpit," and he adds, "or anywhere"—a generalisation which does not strengthen the more particular assurance. And the more particular assurance needs strengthening; for, in the case of several admirable men, by whom it has been made to me in private, when I have suggested that the work might be begun next Lord's-day, the suggestion was met, if not by fear, by a very decided "unwillingness." Their state of mind I take to be more represented by the second minister who writes on my letters. He, too, professes not to be afraid of saying what he knows "on the subject of the composition of the Bible;" and he even goes a certain guarded length as to the use of the pulpit. On the composition of the Bible, he says, "We have all opportunities of saying what we think wise when we lecture on a particular book, or when we teach our young people." Precisely; we have all opportunities, but do we all use them to the effect of revealing the more common and notorious facts about it—facts which we cannot even keep from the people without a certain effort? Were I a Ro-

man Catholic, I should expect the priest to tell me what he "thought wise," and nothing more; for on their theory that and nothing more is his duty. But, being a Protestant, I have a direct interest in God's Word, and I claim a right to be acquainted with the facts by which God has introduced and evidenced His Word to the world in general, and to me in particular. And when the minister of that Word (for the education of whom in the knowledge of those very facts I have probably paid, to use no higher consideration), tells me that he thinks it not "wise" to communicate them to me, I refuse to be diverted to that question of his wisdom—I absolutely question his *right* to withhold them. The matter is a great deal too fundamental for the other treatment. When God's providence has selected a particular method, the opinion that that method was injudicious may be very conscientious—I know in many cases it is—but it is irrelevant. And when He has laid upon our faith a duty of dealing according to evidence, the question whether we shall look at the evidence or not is scarcely one of discretion or expediency.

Whether this duty of the ministry, supposing it to be one, is to be discharged through the pulpit, is a subordinate question. But the criticisms with which my letters to you have been honoured have made me feel more strongly than before that those ministers who really desire to discharge it will find the pulpit the natural and also the best place. One excellent and able minister of the gospel, who writes anonymously, and another who gives his name, have both objected to this plan. But much the larger part of their argument, in bulk at least, is directed to a proposal not only different from mine, but broadly contrasted with it. The former suggests that I wish to turn the pulpit every now and then into "a chair," or at least to make it into a bright look-out on the world of letters, that it may convey to the pew new critical discoveries, and keep us "abreast of the age" by "critical excursions." But my friend must have taken the precaution of burning my letters before answering them, because, in precise and intended contrast to this, I had exhausted myself in warning him that this was *not* what I was to deal with,

but merely "the more common and ordinary knowledge on matters of the canon, which all ministers attain in the course of their education," and even which every young minister knows "who is not disgracefully ignorant of the elements of his profession." Not only so, but even with regard to this knowledge, common to all ministers, my suggestion was that it might be communicated to the laity, "not, of course, in constant detail," but in the "broader and more notorious outlines." My command of language is limited, but I thought I had guarded on this point against misinterpretation by any amount of stupidity. I had evidently not calculated on the still greater power of affection for the Christian people to divert honest and able men from questions with which they are invited to deal, but which, for the sake of their people, they conscientiously dislike.

It is always an advantage when you can accept the very illustration which disputants have selected as the strongest to use against you. Both Mr M—— and his brother minister are down upon me about 2d Peter. The latter says, "You want us to give critical discoveries—announcing, for example, one fine morning that this book is 66 times less authoritative than the Epistle to the Romans," and the former represents me as wishing to "introduce into our public teaching such questions and considerations as whether the evidence for the canonicity of the one epistle is 'sixteen or sixty' times stronger than the evidence for the other." Now, I need not say to you that this is precisely the converse of what I did say and desire. I introduced the sixteen and sixty-six expressly in order to waive both aside, and I waived aside all such questions as *not* what I proposed, because that would be to "entertain the Christian people" with the individual minister's idea of the exact relative amount of evidence on a point not capable of exact treatment. What I did say or imply was just the other thing. It was this. There is a "common or ordinary knowledge" on this matter of the historical evidence for 2d Peter, which you to whom I write, and the other minister who writes for you, and Mr M—— who excels us all in eschewing anonymity, have all attained, not

as a critical discovery, but in the course of your theological education, as does every young minister who is not ignorant of the elements of his profession. The proportion between the evidence for the apostolicity of this epistle, and that for the apostolicity of some others may be as 1 to 66, or 56, or 46; you may differ on these, but there is some minimum on which you agree (I suggested even 10). And the one question which I raised was as to whether it was well to conceal this and similar common knowledge from the Christian people instead of communicating it to them, perhaps on some occasion in the ordinary course of Christian teaching. It is not so ambitious a proposal as that which has been exchanged for it. But it is a sufficiently grave question, and I am far from being offended with the anxiety for the public weal which has unconsciously led to the substitution of one more easily answered.

And now that we have got back to the real question, I am unable to see that the answers made to it have any cogency other than that of feeling. The proposal is that each minister should communicate to his congregation what, in his view, is well-ascertained and settled as to the formation of the canon—at least in broader outline. This, Mr M—— says, would be "to preach the gospel of modern criticism," instead of the gospel. But does he hold that the modern criticism is equivalent to well-ascertained and settled truth? And, if not, what discordance is there between what, in his opinion, is well-ascertained truth and the preaching of the gospel? Does he find any in his own mind? And if there is none there, why should there be any in the minds of the Christian people? There is no reason that I can see, unless the well-ascertained truth has been so hidden from them as to become strange in their eyes.

But at this point appears a view of preaching which I consider of great importance, and it has been stated not so much by Mr M—— as by my other friend. I had desired that the Lord's-day teaching should occasionally include such matters as the more notorious facts on the formation of the canon. He meets this by saying that the Lord's-day services are "for the purposes of worship and edification," and for applying

Christianity "in a practical way," and that it is "best to preserve our public assemblies on Sabbath for those spiritual exercises which have been instituted for the furtherance of the religious life." Well, this contrast between preaching the truth and preaching for edification, and the magnifying of the latter over the former, is very familiar to us; but we have usually heard it from the other side of the Border, and have answered that in Scotland at least all truth preached in its proper proportion tends to edification. Are we to make an exception to this in the case of truth as to the evidence of the Scripture canon? Why should not this, stated in its due proportion and on proper occasion (and no one pretends that I have suggested anything else), tend to edification? Does truth fight with truth? Is the reception of Scripture not a part of truth? Or is the receiving of it on its true grounds hostile to receiving the gospel which it contains?

I should find it difficult to treat the argument seriously were it not that I have found it adopted by ministers of opposite views, and especially by those on the other side from my present critics. It is they who have hitherto usually said, "O, what does it matter about Deuteronomy? Leave that to the critics. Preach the gospel, preach Christ, who is the substance of the gospel, and leave all these questions of the canon alone." It is they who have usually urged this in Presbyteries and Assemblies; and, as a layman, I thought they went too far even when their argument referred to difficult and controverted points. And so I went to some of them—men themselves known as earnest and admirable preachers—and stated the argument of these letters. "You don't think we laymen are fitted to act as a jury on these new points, and perhaps you are right, though I don't see to whom else you can ultimately go. But why do you not begin at the beginning? There are well-ascertained facts as to canon which all ministers know. Why not leave the doubtful points alone, and state these which are not doubtful in the course of your ordinary teaching?" And the answer was, in effect, "God forbid! Whatever we do, let us not dis-

turb the minds of our congregations." And, now, having put the same thing in public, I have the same answer from the other side, "Let us not disturb the minds of our congregations by communicating to them even the best-ascertained results of criticism, seeing that there are other results which are not well-ascertained, and may be dangerous and unsettling."

Now, perhaps, this concurrence of usually opposed authorities ought to impress one as conclusive. I regret to say that on my mind it has had very much the opposite effect. It seems to me simply the most ominous symptom in the whole of our body politic; and, to tell the truth, it is this which has driven from neutrality into speech one who knows how much less qualified than many around him he is in mental equipment and in moral strength to deal with such subjects. But so long as we are perfectly open and candid in our dealings as between ministers and laymen, we have good reason, and we have right, to look, under God's hand, for a happy issue out of all our troubles. The moment we slide into any other course, or, at least, the moment we begin to defend it, we are in a very ugly path. It is a path which others have tried before us. Germany has very brilliant qualities, but one of its characteristics I have always considered as unfortunate. The pulpit gives itself, there, exclusively to "edification" and "practical Christianity," avoiding even the "well-ascertained" results of Biblical science. Has this worked well? Have believing theologians there the hold they ought to have on the people? Are we prepared to inaugurate the same course in Scotland? Have we considered the frightful results that may begin to gather and grow upon us from this time forward? And, apart from expediency and results, have we the right to do it?

On the other hand, can there be any more fitting preparation for difficult and dark questions than being faithful to the light we already have? We, the laity, find the clergy differ among themselves on advanced questions of criticism, which, you all assure us, concern us. Would we not be better able to judge of them if you made us acquainted with those more elementary results of criticism on which you are all agreed? Is it not

possible that great good might result from this obvious process? It was on this point that I had intended a concluding letter to you which the

present argumentative communication has delayed.

## VI.

MY DEAR SIR,—It is time to say something in conclusion on the practical and present bearings of the questions here raised.

1. You reminded me in the course of these letters of my admission that they do not bear, and are not intended to bear, upon the decision of the case of Professor Robertson Smith. And you added, good-humouredly but firmly, that in that case they do not touch upon the great question before Scotland at the present time. I think your conclusion may be hasty in more respects than one.

In the first place, you assume that the decision of the case of Professor Smith, one way or other, will decide the great theological question of our time. Is it certain that it will decide it even in the Free Church? I find a great deal of doubt on this in the best-informed quarters within that body; and outside it, among men who take a speculative and occasionally malicious interest in the matter, I have seen bets exchanged on the question whether the deposition of the Professor would hinder or advance the influence of his opinions within your communion. I have made no bet on the subject, but I will hazard an opinion. Unless the supposed condemnation is conducted in such a way as to carry moral weight (*in addition* to being the decision of a majority), it will tend very strongly to advance the opinions which are condemned—to advance them even in the Free Church. That is no very hazardous prophecy where a Church is about equally divided on the question of toleration, and where the whole of the colleges and the mass of the young men are alleged, truly or falsely, to be tinctured with the same views. Your co-pesbyter has no doubt publicly protested that this allegation is a great mistake, and that Professor Smith's views are isolated and exceptional, and

have no connection with the general opinions of learned men in his body. If that were true, the right decision of his case would certainly not be the great question for Scotland. But I take it that to say that Professor Smith's views have no connection with a general drift of opinion, is at least an exaggeration. They are one result—perhaps an illegitimate result—of a method of inquiry which is exceedingly common among learned men in all Churches, and which is supposed by many to be necessary. The establishing of general principles on this method may settle the case of Professor Smith, but it will settle a good many other things, too; while the settlement of the case of Professor Smith, ignoring such general principles, would be a rootless and fruitless thing. In as far, therefore, as the suggestions I have ventured bear on the ascertainment or acknowledgment of general principles, they may have to do (and before closing this letter, I shall argue that they have seriously to do) with the great question of our time, although they certainly do not bear directly upon the decision of this particular case.

Besides, what we have been discussing has surely some bearing, if not upon the final decision of Professor Smith's case, at least upon its present phase. The immediate question in it is what the special meeting of Commission is to say or do. It cannot, I suppose, take the matter up judicially, or carry on a process, though it may invite the attention of Church bodies who can do both. But many are desirous that it should anticipate their verdict—should assume, before trial and without trial, that mischievous or heretical tendency of the articles which a trial might ascertain, and for the good of the people of Scotland utter an unjudicial but yet condemnatory voice. That is, to say the least, a perilous rôle to assume. It would

be so even were there a fixed standard according to which the unjudicial body proposed to utter its hasty condemnation. But how much more dangerous does it become when I recall the proposal which gave occasion to these letters—the proposal to abandon for this once the standard of the Confession, and to substitute for it some other and traditional standard, never hitherto formulated? The two pre-requisites for justice have hitherto been supposed to be a court and a code—a judicial body of some sort to try the case, and a standard of some sort by which it may be tried. To abandon *either* of these has usually been held a risky thing. But to abandon both—and to abandon both at the same time! Even a Presbytery or an Assembly, which are strictly judicial bodies, would be held to do a strong thing if, in a particular case, they stepped aside from the written creed, and tried a man instead by the “accepted faith” of the Church. And what these regular courts would not venture to do is suggested to be done by that fortuitous concourse of atoms—a meeting of Commission! Or, put it the other way. The Commission of Assembly, casual and fortuitous as its concourse often is, has done good work in the past. But it would be a strong thing for it suddenly to assume a judicial or condemnatory function with regard to a minister or professor of the Church—a very strong thing, even if the regular judicial courts of the Church were not known to be greatly divided in opinion on the subject. It would be an exceedingly strong thing for the Commission, even did it propose, in doing so, to adhere to the common creed. But what shall be said of the proposal that the Commission, when it takes to deal with a case—if case it can be called, which is without libel, without indictment, without service, without accuser, and without accused—without any of the forms which real courts find indispensable—what shall be said of the proposal that it shall for this once only, and in order to attain its end, abandon, on the 27th of October, the creed by which, up to the 26th October, Professor Smith and all others have been tried, and pronounce a condemnation according to a tradition in the minds of the majority?

But the main question is, What kind of tradi-

tion is it which we are invited thus to substitute? The words of the remit to the committee are to consider the bearing of Professor Smith’s new writings on “the accepted belief and teaching” of the Church. What is meant by the *accepted* belief and teaching? I cannot gather from the letter of Mr Norman Walker, who has made himself the spokesman of a desire for a change, what is intended—except that he considers it of great importance that it should not continue to be mere acceptance as expressed in the Confession. But is there one accepted faith and teaching of the Free Church on the subject of the canon and inspiration of Scripture distinct from what is expressed in the Confession? It is at this point that the facts elicited by the letters which I now close come to be of immediate importance. It appears that there is well-ascertained truth as to the formation of the canon, as to the varying evidence for the different books and their parts, and as to the duty of the individual conscience in view of the varying evidence so presented to it, which is made quite familiar to the ministerial mind in the ordinary course of its education, and is, indeed, beginning to be popularised in little books like those of Canon Westcott. It is part of the ordinary possession of the educated minister. But a large number of the ministers of the Free Church, while not denying this, express strong dislike to communicate it to their people. And the ground of that dislike is the important thing. It is that it would shock or harass the faith of their people, or of some of them. It does not harass, much less shock, their own faith; their own faith proceeds upon it. But the accepted faith of their people, or of great part of them, would be shocked by the truth upon this point, and therefore they count it part of pastoral wisdom to withhold from them the truth. Now, putting aside for the moment the question of the morality of this on Protestant principles, look at the bearing of it on the new proposal as to the Commission. That body is to look at views on certain questions relating to Scripture and the canon of Scripture in their bearing, not on the Confession, but on the “accepted belief” of the Church. But the accepted belief of the ministry of the Church on this matter is confessedly different



from that of the laity—at least of the laity who depend upon them for instruction; so different that to attempt suddenly to make the latter accept the universal belief of the former would produce a shock to faith. And it is in this state of matters that we are invited to act, and to act not deliberately but hastily and unjudicially, upon the “accepted belief,” and, more extraordinary still, the “accepted teaching” of the Church as contrasted with its Confession!

I feel the danger and injustice of this more because I have considerable sympathy with the conservative side on Professor Smith's matter, and am prepared to accept a good many of the considerations which they urge. For example, I have never been able to make up my mind whether his position is or is not consistent with the Confession of Faith. I admit the power of the statements which have been made on this subject by his friends—*e.g.*, by the Glasgow professors; but still they leave doubts on the mind, and the very equal division of the Church on this question, far from being discreditable, seems to me to reflect the real difficulty of the case. I agree therefore with Mr Walker and his friends that it is a doubtful point whether the present creed of the Church can be made an efficient instrument for repressing the views which have again been presented. But I agree with them on another point. While I have doubts whether Professor Smith's views are or are not consistent with the Confession, I have no doubt that there is a popularly-“accepted belief” in the Free Church on the subjects of the canon and of inspiration with which they are inconsistent. Farther, I admit that this popularly-accepted belief is on the whole coincident with the popularly-“accepted teaching” on the subject. The whole drift of these letters has been to show that the accepted teaching (of the laity, not of the ministers) systematically omits a certain amount of the acknowledged truth upon the matter, and the answer made to this has not been a denial, but an argument—I think a well-founded argument—that if the accepted teaching did otherwise it would disturb the accepted belief. The moral question thus raised must work itself out, but in the meantime I cannot but admit that in my view Professor Smith's opinions

are opposed to the popularly-accepted teaching as well as to the popularly-accepted belief. If, therefore, an effectual transition could now be made from the one standard to the other, from the Confession or creed to either the popular “belief” or the popular “teaching”—as both expressions are conjoined in the question proposed to the Commission—then the practical difficulty might be solved. The condemnation which can only be slowly, if at all, attained by the regular judicial organs of the Church dealing according to its Standard, might be suddenly uttered by a more popular gathering, which should found (and which could found, I think not falsely, but truly) upon the popular teaching and the popular belief. I agree, therefore, that it is possible—and I am not insensible to some of the considerations in its favour. Some men don't like superseding an ancient Confession in favour of the presently-accepted faith. I think to do so is not only legitimate but a clear duty—provided the change is not made extempore or *ad hominem*, but deliberately, and after having formulated what the now accepted faith of the Church is and ought to be. Some men, again, don't believe, or affect not to believe, that Professor Smith's views would seriously disturb the popularly-accepted belief of the Free Church—the belief of the majority of the laity who believe at all. I think them eminently fitted (and that not merely by their mode of presentation) to give that composite belief a dangerous and unsettling shock—unsettling to the belief held, and dangerous to the men who hold it. I see, therefore, the whole temptation to found, suddenly and arbitrarily, on that accepted faith, instead of abiding by the written creed—a temptation which will be felt most in some respects by those of you ministers who have most of the pastor's heart, and who care least about “splitting sacred words” in comparison of saving souls. And yet I believe you are precisely the people who will feel most the moral impossibility of the course proposed. And you will feel it not merely on account of the personal injustice to the minister dealt with—a point on which the *esprit de corps* reinforces and ought to reinforce the sense of right and the instinct of

equity. For there is another consideration. If there is any truth in the ground which we have traversed together, it is you who are chiefly responsible for any divergence between the accepted faith of the laity on these subjects and your own. The reticence which has been used may have been right or wrong, justifiable or otherwise, but it equally produces its results. The partial teaching is inevitably "accepted" by its hearers as the whole, and an accepted faith is thus formed which in a very short time comes to be pleaded to various effects, some worse than others. It is bad enough when it is pleaded that the accepted faith, being a one-sided faith, is necessarily fragile, and that therefore the minister must not endanger it by preaching the whole. But how much worse if it is proposed to elevate this accepted faith, *because* of its one-sidedness and fragility, into the place hitherto held either by the doctrinal standard of the Church or by the whole truth as known to the ministry and educated laity!

II. I pass now from the Aberdeen case. It is only one of many which are sure to arise in the present day, and the inability to judge of it, which I and other laymen feel, has raised with me the general question—What is the attitude of mind and conscience in which laymen ought to approach them all? In short, I have backed into the harbour that, with your aid, I may "adjust my compasses." It is, perhaps, not an easy task. But am I wrong in assuming one point—that when your needle points to the true north, mine cannot do wrong to point in the same direction? Of course, you see what I mean. Hitherto the ministers of every Protestant Church have taken for granted that *criticism* of the books claiming to be inspired is the means, the only means, the divinely-appointed means, of making up for ourselves the canon, or sum of those books, and that this duty lies upon each generation of the Church, and has not, as Roman Catholics believe, been performed once for all and authoritatively by some previous Pope, patriarch, or father. And in your colleges you are put through all this when students, as an ordinary and necessary part of work and duty. But if this is duty and work laid upon you ministers

age after age—not taken up at your own hand, but laid upon the conscience by God—then it involves a certain appropriate attitude of mind. It involves a critical attitude of mind, a habitually critical attitude of mind, even towards Scripture, as part of the habit of mind which you are bound to cultivate. It is only part of that due habit of mind. It is not the whole. On the contrary, what has been said implies that the habitually critical attitude of mind towards Scripture and the parts of Scripture is and must be consistent with the other qualities of mind towards it which God also demands—such qualities as reverence, and a divine faith in its message and in its author. Now, that is how God has willed you to adjust *your* compass, and though it may not be easy to keep the needle pointing aright, you know it can only be done by having respect to both duties—criticism and faith. Well, one point which seems to be agreed upon by Protestants is that this is in no respect a duty of the so-called clergy alone. It belongs to the individual and to the layman; and between him and God's Word no minister and no Church has authority to interfere, though he has a right to such assistance as they can give. But he is the judge, upon his own responsibility. Now, is this true, or is it not? If it is not, it ought not to be put as a fundamental of Protestantism. But if it is true, then I am sure there are many people in Scotland, some even in your own congregation, who need to be familiarised with it. And why should they be familiarised with it? Because this duty is one which requires in laymen, as truly as in ministers, a certain attitude of mind. And the right attitude of mind, on central and religious subjects, is not a thing easily attained—is not a thing to be at all attained by those who do not feel their need of it, or who have been taught that they have no need of it. Did you, as a student, feel no need of divine guidance and even of human help, when the combined duties of criticism and faith first opened upon you? And why should I need moral preparation less than you?

I am satisfied that the lack of this preparation is the lesson forced upon many of us by recent events. We have been precipitated, without

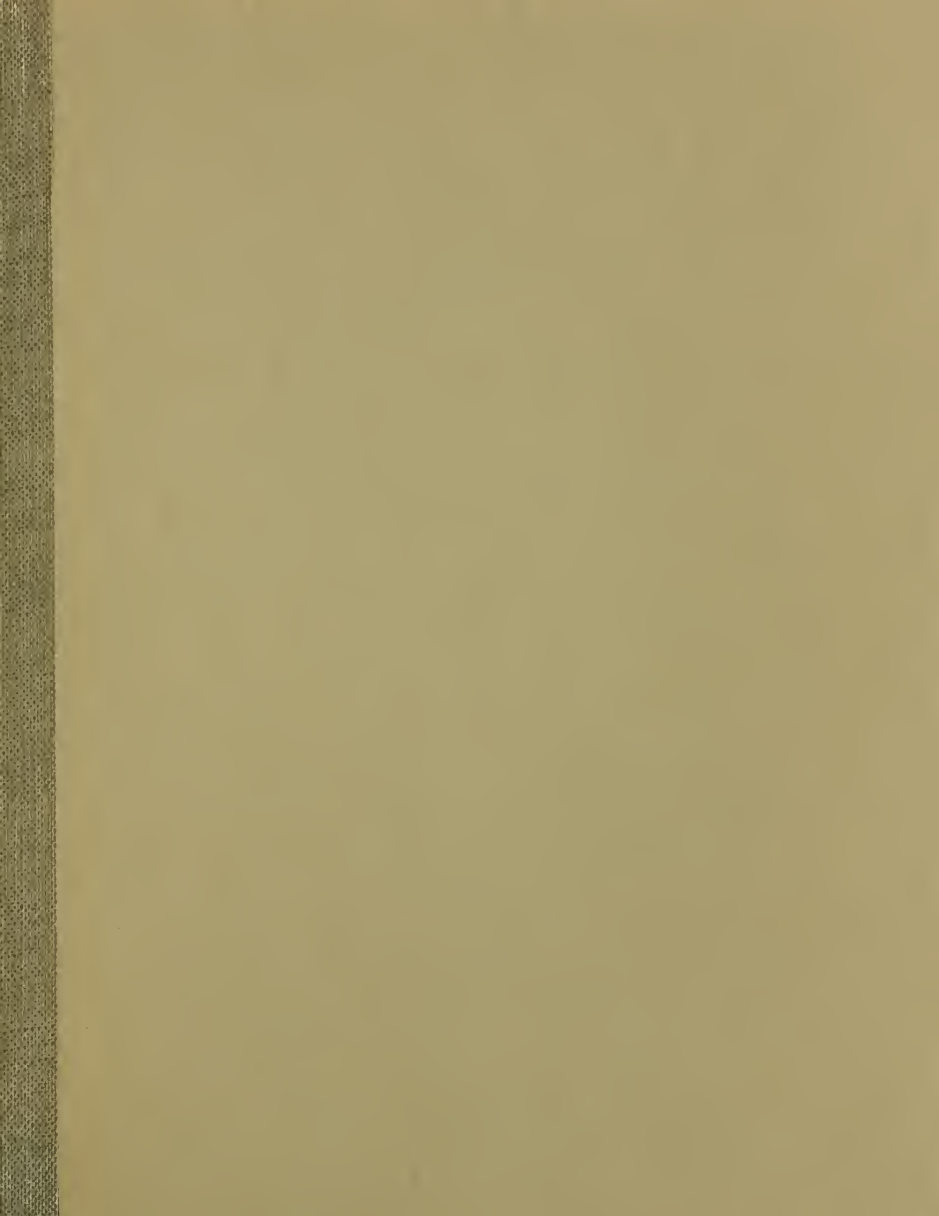
preparation, into matters on which we are told that we are bound to judge, but for which we find ourselves unqualified. And now it seems to be suggested that we should abandon that duty altogether. The question in the Free Church appears to be approaching a curious point. More than two years ago, when it was at an early stage, Principal Rainy faced the general subject in four published lectures on the Bible and criticism. They had all his characteristic power of original truism. But in this book the truism was held to be more obvious than the originality. Men said of it, as Dr Duncan said of Dr Gordon's sermons, that the most striking sentence was the *sentence after the last*. So far as the sentences went, they were held to be wise beyond measure, but to be very safe, if not even tame. And yet, all through, it assumed and proclaimed criticism to be a necessity of faith, as well as a duty obvious to the natural conscience, and gave earnest counsels as to the mental and moral habitudes it required. Well, but that was two years ago. What was a mere truism then is ignored or doubted now. Professor Binnie writes a pamphlet in 1880, and throughout it he speaks of criticism not as a necessity of faith and conscience, but as an unmixed evil, and of the critical school—not any particular section of that school—as simply unbelieving. Now, which is right? It may be answered that Professor Binnie's use of the word is merely an ambiguity. But it is a very retrograde and ominous kind of ambiguity. I remember well the blush which adorned your countenance when, not so very long since, a prominent member of the Free Church publicly denounced the teaching of criticism, and in particular the teaching of the evidence for the several books of the canon, in the modern divinity halls of Scotland. There was no such thing in his youth, he said, and he saw no business that we had with anything but the results in the Confession of Faith. The young men around you were loud in their contempt for an utterance which would make the Church and its colleges the laughing-stock of every Protestant communion. You said nothing, but you told me afterwards that you thought such teaching neces-

sary as part of Scripture apologetics. Most true; but is Scripture apologetic necessary in the present day for ministers only and not for laymen? And when a process is ascertained to be necessary apologetically—*i.e.*, for the defence of Scripture—does it make it less important that it is also necessary fundamentally—*i.e.*, for the ascertainment of Scripture? And if laymen are interested even in the defence of Scripture, are they not at least equally interested in its evidence and ascertainment? And if this is a duty to which ministers and laymen are (as you tell us) both called, should not both either be alike obedient to the heavenly vision, or alike refuse it altogether? If criticism is a good thing, should not laymen and ministers, as well as professors, take part in it? If it is a bad thing, should it not be stopped in the colleges, as well as outside?

Lastly, as to the hopefulness of turning in God's name to the ordinary work of criticism. You and others think that the present state of matters has sad and serious aspects. Of course it has. It is a serious thing to be born into this world at all, and it is a serious thing when in it to have to do with God's revelation and call. And the state of matters in our country is especially serious, because we are passing from the immoral but most comfortable habit of resting upon human authority in matters of faith. The change can never be made without risk of harm and loss. Yet the other direction is the only one in which we can see light. *Nil desperandum Christo duce et auspice Christo*. I do not indeed wish to cast everything loose, even under pretext of following such high guidance. But when so many laymen are in doubt and difficulty, it has occurred to me to inquire whether it may not be well in the first place to build on what our ministers familiarly know to be truth and right. There is not much hope for us if we neglect what we confess to be fundamental duty, and avoid the attitude of mind which it would impose upon us. If we turn to that duty in dependence upon our Leader, we may still have many an anxiety due to our own folly and sin, but our faces will then be set to the dawning of the day.—I am, &c.,

A LAYMAN.

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